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ESSAY *on the* STILE *of Doctor* SAMUEL JOHNSON.

No. I.

By the Rev. ROBERT BURROWES, *A. M. and M. R. I. A.*

AS the primary and immediate desire of every reader must necessarily be to understand the meaning of his author, of all the faults of stile obscurity must be the most obvious and offensive. Equally unpleasing to him who studies for instruction, and to him who reads for entertainment ; to the indolent as demanding, and to the active as not rewarding his exertions, all classes unite to reprobate it. Different from all other faults in this, that no critical sagacity, no erudition is required to perceive it, in the same moment it is perceived and condemned : the author is tried by judges whose only qualification is, that they do not understand ; and as ignorance is always severe, the awful sentence “ si non vis intelligi, debes negligi,” dooms him without farther enquiry to that punishment, which the Republic of Letters has always esteemed the most mortifying.

Read
March 13,
1786.

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BUT

BUT this sentence is too general to be always just: there is sometimes an embarrassment in the subject-matter which causes an inevitable obscurity in treating of it; and there is often an inability in the judge which self-love screens from observation. "The critic," says Dr. Johnson, in a paper of his *Idler*, which he seems to have designed as a defence of his own style against this objection, "ought always to enquire whether he is incommoded by the author's fault or his own." How far this paper justifies Johnson's style shall be considered in the subsequent part of this essay: it is sufficient at present to observe, that as all obscurity is relative, its cause may reside either in the reader or in the writer, and even where the reader must be acquitted, the writer is not always to be condemned.

THAT Johnson's style is obscure, the testimony of all unlearned readers abundantly confirms; and from the same authority the cause may be stated to be his perpetual affectation of expressing his thoughts by the use of polysyllables of Latin derivation: a fault, which confines to men of erudition the most animating enforcements to virtue and the most salutary rules of conduct, by disqualifying all who have not been made acquainted by a liberal education with the Latin appellations for things, or those, from whose memories the common use of the English names has in course of time effaced them. And let it not be said that such a class is beneath the attention of an author, when it is considered that almost the whole female world, from the circumstances of their education are necessarily included in it. They learn the words of their language from conversation or familiar books; but with whom are they to converse, or what volumes of musty pedantry
are

are they to ransack, to be enabled to peruse the writings of Johnson without frequent recourse to his dictionary? Nor has this wilful exclusion of the unlearned readers served as a means of conciliating the favour of the learned, who, though they understand Latin, in an English work expect to find English; and whatever may be the peculiarities of their own stile, are forward enough to discover and reprobate those of others.

Thus Dr. Johnson observes, that Milton formed his stile on a perverse and pedantic principle: he was desirous “to use English words with a foreign idiom.” But Milton’s poetry, if indeed a defence be necessary, is sufficiently defended by established poetic license: and for his prose, let it be observed, that his subjects were learned, and I may say technical, and his readers of such description as left it matter of indifference whether they should be addressed in English or in Latin: that he was engaged in repeated controversies with foreigners, and his works designed to persecute the fortunes of the exiled monarch over the continent, and written, in some sort officially, by the Latin secretary to Cromwell. But surely that principle, which has led Johnson to seek for remote words, though with the English idiom, is no less pedantic than Milton’s, and much more injurious by its obscurity. The reader who knows the single words may perhaps be able to overcome the difficulties of the arrangement, but for ignorance of the single words no remedy can with efficacy be applied. Johnson has besides no peculiarity of situation to plead in excuse, but has on the contrary adopted his pedantic principle against the dissuasive influence of circumstances. From the writer of an English dictionary, there might reasonably be expected

pected a nice selection of words, purely and radically English, or at least the use of such only as had been indisputably admitted into the language: and the complexion of his readers, as well as the popular subjects he treated of, were such as might be thought to furnish little temptation to learned and antiquated phraseology. Indeed, if rules for periodical essays are to be drawn from the practice of their great English original, Mr. Addison, as the rules of epic poetry from Homer's, nothing can be more opposite to their true character; for as their professed intent is the improvement of general manners, their style, as well as their subjects, should be levelled to understandings of every description.

It may be said, however, in favour of Johnson, that the great law-givers of criticism have indulged writers of eminence in a license for calling in the aid of foreign words. But this indulgence, which of right belongs only to poetry, and the more dignified kinds of prose, is even granted to them with but a sparing hand; "*dabitur licentia sumpta pudenter.*" Our Author, who in his poems has made but little use of this privilege, has in his prose, extended a limited sufferance to the most unqualified permission and encouragement: he has preferred, on all occasions where a choice was to be made, the remote word of Latin derivation to the received English one, and has brought in the whole vocabulary of natural philosophy, to perplex and encumber familiar English writing. I do not speak of a few words scattered rarely through his works, but of the general character of his style appearing in every page; not of single acts, but of confirmed and prevailing habits; of new-raised colonies, disdaining

disdaining an association with the natives, and threatening the final destruction of our language. The reader, at his first perusal of the Rambler, finds himself bewildered in a labyrinth of long and learned words, distracted with foreign sounds, and exiled from his native speech, in perpetual want of an interpreter: disgusted at the intrusion of so many phrases to which he has been hitherto a stranger, he labours out a passage through the palpable obscure, and, when he has at last gained the golden prize, laments that so much time should have been wasted, in over-coming the unnecessary obstacles to its approach.

THOUGH this representation may appear somewhat extravagant, yet a few sentences selected from this author may shew that it does not misrepresent the feelings of ordinary readers, or exaggerate the difficulties of his style. "What then can ensue but
 " a continual exacerbation of hatred, an unextinguishable feud,
 " and an incessant reciprocation of mischief?" "When the
 " radical idea shoots out into parallel ramifications, how can a
 " consecutive series be formed of senses in their nature collateral."
 "These bursts of light and involutions of darkness, these
 " transient and involuntary excursions and retrocessions of inven-
 " tion." "Experience quickly shews the tortuosities of imaginary
 " rectitude, the complications of simplicity, and the asperities
 " of smoothness." Who could understand the meaning of the
 word NET-WORK, by reading its definition in a dictionary as "a
 " thing reticulated, or decussated, with interfices between the
 " intersections?" Or who could know, that "the practice of
 " appending to the narratives of public transactions, more minute
 " and domestic intelligence," meant "filling the news-papers
 " with

“ with advertisements,” if Johnson himself had not kindly assisted us with the translation. Such passages are inconsistent with the censure passed in his *Idler* on a ridiculous citizen, who by associating with stage players had learned a new language; and when a customer has talked longer than he is willing to hear, is made to complain that “ he has been excruciated with “ unmeaning verbosity.” The author of the *Rambler*, though not a citizen, has as little claim to the privilege of speaking unintelligibly.

THERE are however two occasions on which this fault appears yet more extravagant and ridiculous. The first of these is, where personages of different descriptions are introduced as writing in their own characters; for what can be more absurd than to suppose a similarity of style, and particularly where that style is so far from a simple one, in the writings of persons supposed to be of different ages, tempers, sexes and occupations. Yet all the correspondents of the *Rambler* seem infected with the same literary contagion, and the Johnsonian distemper to have been equally communicated to all. Thus Papilius talks of “ garrulity, erratic “ industry, and heterogenous notions dazzling the attention “ with sudden scintillations of conceit.” “ Victoria passes through “ the cosmetic discipline, covered with emollients, and punished with artificial excoriations.” Misocapelus tells of his “ officinal “ state, adhesions of trade, and ambulatory projects;” and Hypertatus describes the “ flaccid sides of a foot-ball swelling out “ into stiffness and extension,” and talks of “ concentration of “ understanding, barometrical pneumatology,” and “ tenuity of “ a defecated air.” In such writings the hand of the master must be immediately perceived; the existence of the imaginary correspondents

correspondents cannot even for a moment be believed, and the Rambler stands convicted of an ineffectual and unnecessary attempt to raise his own consequence by forging letters to himself.

THE second occasion on which this fault is equally glaring, is where ordinary or perhaps mean subjects become necessary to be treated of; and a few instances from our author may well warrant my asserting that on such occasions, as he himself says less deservedly of Dr. Young,—“burlesque cannot go beyond him.” Thus a calamity which will not admit being complained of, is in Johnson’s language, such as “will not justify the acerbity “of exclamation, or support the solemnity of vocal grief:” to deny and to profess, are to “pronounce the monosyllables of “coldness and the sonorous periods of respectful profession:” when the skillet is watched on the fire, we see it “simmer with “the due degree of heat, and snatch it off at the moment of “projection:” for sun-set, we read “the gentle coruscations “of declining day;” and for washing the face with exactness, we have, “washing with oriental scrupulosity.” Mean and vulgar expressions cannot have a more powerful recommendation than that one of the ablest writers in the English language could only thus avoid them.

JOHNSON was a writer of too attentive and critical observation to be ignorant of this remarkable peculiarity of his own style. In the last paper of his Rambler, where he treats of his work as a classical English composition, he takes notice of, and by a defence, which if admitted would justify and recommend it, shews himself not a little prejudiced in its favour.

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After declaring, with some ostentation, that “ he has laboured
 “ to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it
 “ from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular
 “ combinations;” that “ something perhaps he has added to
 “ the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony
 “ of its cadence;” he proceeds to subjoin the following passage:
 “ When common words were less pleasing to the ear, or less
 “ distinct in their signification, I have familiarized the terms of
 “ philosophy by applying them to known objects and popular
 “ ideas; but have rarely admitted any word not authorized by
 “ former writers: for I believe that whoever knows the English
 “ tongue in its present extent, will be able to express his thoughts,
 “ without farther help from other nations.” The first of these
 reasons for substituting, in place of a received familiar English
 word, a remote philosophical one, such as are most of Johnson’s
 Latin abstract substantives, is its being more pleasing to the ear.
 But this can only be deemed sufficient by those who would
 submit sense to sound, and for the sake of being admired by
 some, would be content not to be understood by others. And
 though, in some instances, for the sake of tempering the con-
 stitutional roughness of the English language, this might be
 admitted, yet it never can be contended for in such latitude,
 as would justify the practice of our author. This he well knew,
 and accordingly defending hard words in an essay in his *Idler*, he
 insists largely on the second plea, the greater distinctness of
 signification. “ Difference of thoughts,” he says, “ will produce
 “ difference of language: he that thinks with more extent than
 “ another, will want words of larger meaning; he that thinks
 “ with more subtilty, will seek for terms of more nice discrimi-
 “ nation.” In this argument there is certainly some degree of
 weight,

weight, and the exact appropriation and perspicuity of Johnson's words in some measure confirms it. But that language, which he does not admit to have sunk beneath Milton, would surely have been sufficient to have supported him; and, as he himself observes, "though an art cannot be taught without its proper terms, yet it is not always necessary to teach the art: in morality it is one thing to discuss the niceties of the casuist, and another to direct the practice of common life." Let the nature of periodical publications determine, which should be more properly the object of the author. But he is not reduced to the alternative: if the testimony of many English authors of eminence, confirmed experimentally by their own practice, is to be relied on, exactness of thought is not necessarily at variance with familiar expression: and if this union was not impossible, would not some endeavour to effect it have deserved the attention of Johnson? Of Johnson who, while his dictionary proves such accurate and copious knowledge of the powers of our received words, as could not have failed of accomplishing the patriotic task, however arduous, gives in his other works the stronger reason to lament, that his prejudices in favour of a vicious and affected style should have prevented his undertaking it.

BUT this fault is surely committed without excuse, in every case where the language furnishes a received word adequate to the distinct communication of the idea: and that many such have innocently incurred Doctor Johnson's displeasure must be abundantly evident to every reader. A page of his writings, compared with one of any of our eminent English authors on the same subject, will furnish many instances, which cannot be accounted for

by attention to harmony of sound, or distinctness of signification : instances, to be ascribed merely to that wantonness of habit which after quoting Congreve's declaration, that " he wrote the " *Old Batchelor* to amuse himself in his recovery from a fit of " sickness," thinks proper, a few lines after, to explain it in Johnson's words, by saying, " the *Old Batchelor* was written in " the languor of convalescence." It would seem that the aunt of Bellaria *, who gives the writings of the *Rambler* to her niece for her perusal, and promises to tell her the meaning of any word she should not understand, has undertaken a task, which the author himself suspects to be not unnecessary, and the reader has reason to apprehend she will scarcely be able to accomplish.

JOHNSON says indeed, he has rarely admitted any word, not authorized by former writers : but where are we to seek authorities for " resuscitation, orbity, volant, fatuity, divaricate, asinine, " narcotic, vulnerary, empireumatic, papilionaceous," and innumerable others of the same stamp, which abound in and disgrace his pages ? For " obtund, disruption, sensory or panoply," all occurring in the short compass of a single essay in the *Rambler* ? Or for " cremation, horticulture, germination and decussation," within a few pages in his *Life of Browne* ? They may be found, perhaps, in the works of former writers, but they make no part of the English language. They are the illegitimate offspring of learning by vanity ; adopted indeed, but not naturalized, and though used, yet not authorized : For if use can sufficiently authorize, there is no description of improper words, which can be condemned. Technical words may be defended from Dryden and Milton, obsolete from Shakespeare, vulgar from Swift and Butler. Johnson's fault lies in this, that he has made such frequent

* *Rambler*, No. 191.

quent use of remote and abstruse words of Latin original, that his meaning often becomes unintelligible to readers not possessed of a considerable degree of learning; and whether these words were now first made by him, or having been made by others, had been hitherto denied admittance into the current language, is a matter of perfect indifference.

It must be allowed that these terms are restrained by our author to such precision, that they cannot often resign their places to others more familiar, without some injury to the sense. But such is the copiousness of our language, that there are few ideas on ordinary subjects, which an attentive examination will find incommunicable in its ordinary words. Though we may not have a term to denote the existence of a quality in the abstract, we may perhaps find one to denote it in the concrete; and even though there may be none to express any mode of its existence, there may readily occur one to express its direct negation. It is the business of the writer who wishes to be understood, to try all possible variations of the grammatical structure of his sentence, to see if there be not some which may possibly make known his thought in familiar words. But that this was not the practice of Johnson, his compositions and his celebrated fluency afford the strongest evidence. He seems to have followed the first impulse of his mind in the structure of his sentence, and when he found in his progress no English word at hand to occupy the predetermined place, it was easy to supply the deficiency by calling in a Latin one.

OF this overbearing prejudice, which thus subdued a strongly rational understanding, and misled a judgment eminently critical,
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it may not be useless to enquire the reasons. To the first and principal of these, no man can be a stranger who has so read the works of Johnson as to have formed a just notion of the peculiar genius of the author. Possessed of the most penetrating acuteness and resolute precision of thought, he delights to employ himself in discriminating what common inaccuracy had confounded, and of separating what the grossness of vulgar conception had united. A judgment, thus employed (as he would perhaps himself describe it) in subtilizing distinctions, and dissociating concrete qualities to the state of individual existence, naturally called for language the most determinate, for words of the most abstract significations. Of these common speech could furnish him with but a scanty supply. Familiar words are usually either the names of things actually subsisting, or of qualities denoted adjectively, by reference to those substantives to which they belong: besides, common use gives to familiar words such a latitude of meaning, that there are few which it does not admit in a variety of acceptations. Johnson, unwilling to submit to this inconvenience, which, in every country, to avoid a multiplicity of terms, had been acquiesced in, sought out those remote and abstruse Latin derivatives, which as they had for the most part hitherto been used but once, were as yet appropriated to one signification exclusively. What the natural bent of his genius thus gave birth to, his successive employments strengthened to maturity. The schoolmaster may plead prescription for pedantry; the writer of a dictionary, if attached to words of any description, has peculiar advantages towards storing them in his memory; and if they be terms which occur but rarely, the difficulty of searching out their authorities imprints them more strongly. The writings of Sir Thomas Browne were

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to Johnson the copious vocabularies of the Anglo-Latin stile ; and the numberless quotations from them in his Dictionary, as well as the Life of Browne, which he wrote, are proofs of the attention with which he perused them, and of the estimation in which he held their author. “ Finding,” as he says, “ that our language had been for near a century deviating towards a Gallic structure and phraseology,” he entered into a confederacy with the Latins to prevent it, without considering that many nations had fallen beneath their own auxiliaries. As some moralists would recommend the overcoming of one passion by raising up another to oppose it, he seems to have thought the tendency of our language towards the French would be best corrected by an equal impulse towards the Latin. That he was well versed in all the Latin learning, and minutely critical in the power of its words, is clearly manifested in his writings. His earliest work was a translation of Mr. Pope’s *Messiah* into Latin, and the first establishment of his fame was his imitation of a Latin satirist. We find too, from Mr. Boswell, that he continued his studies in that language to a very late period, and thought it not too learned even for a female ear. Not confined solely to the classics, he quotes the obscure remains of monkish learning, and has delivered precise decisions on the performances of our English poets in that language. His *Life of Milton* more particularly, whom he might have considered as a rival in learning, abounds in proof that Johnson piqued himself not a little on his knowledge of Latin. He opposes in form the system of school-education recommended and adopted by Milton : He is happy in communicating a new authority for a particular acceptation of the word “ *persona* ;” suggests incidentally whether “ *vir gloriosissimus*” be not an impure expression ;

and

and takes especial care to inform us that “vapulandus” is a solecism. Thus his accurate knowledge of the Latin tongue furnished him with materials to engraft into ours; and his ostentatious desire to display that knowledge concurred with the other causes above enumerated to vitiate his style. Determined to deviate from the English language, while his antipathy to the French restrained him on the one side, his predilection for the Latin as naturally enticed him to the other.

YET let me not conclude this part of my subject with too unfavourable an impression of our author. As I have stated fully the faults of his words, it is but candid to declare their merits. They are formed according to the exact analogy of the English language; they are forcible and harmonious; but, above all, they are determinate. Discriminated from each other, and appropriated each to one idea, they convey, to such as understand the author’s language, his genuine sense, without superfluity and without mutilation. The distinctions of words esteemed synonymous, might from his writings be accurately collected. For thoughts the most definite, he has language the most precise; and though his meaning may sometimes be obscure, it can never be misunderstood.